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[Printer friendly version](#)[Email this to a friend](#)**Law Firm, Brockovich Begin Look At Coronet**By **DEBORAH ALBERTO** dalberto@tampatrib.com

Published: Aug 6, 2003

PLANT CITY - Erin Brockovich's well-chronicled investigation of a California polluter rocketed her to national fame when the giant utility paid \$333 million in damages to 600 residents.

She has been portrayed on the big screen by Julia Roberts and lauded by environmentalists across the country.

Now she is focusing on Plant City.

Intrigued by news reports about health complaints near Coronet Industries and spurred on by the concerned mother of a child with disabilities, Brockovich and lawyer Ed Masry have expressed what Masry termed Monday a "serious interest" in the case.

Also on Monday, health officials began testing private wells at homes near Coronet to determine whether there is a link between the plant and residents' health problems.

Brockovich, a single mom at the time of the movie, remarried and changed her name to Brockovich-Ellis. The movie was based on a true story about a file clerk's drive to investigate and expose the gas and electric company's pollution problems, which resulted in the largest toxic tort settlement in U.S. history.

Brockovich-Ellis still is employed by the law firm of Masry and Vititoe, where she is the head of the firm's research department. She will lead the firm's investigation of Coronet Industries, Masry said.

The firm's interest was piqued by memos they received during the last couple of weeks from residents living near Coronet, as well as recent news articles, Masry

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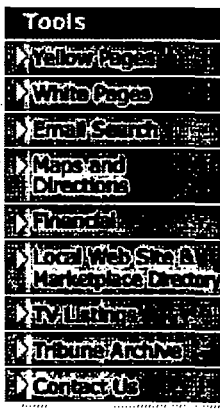
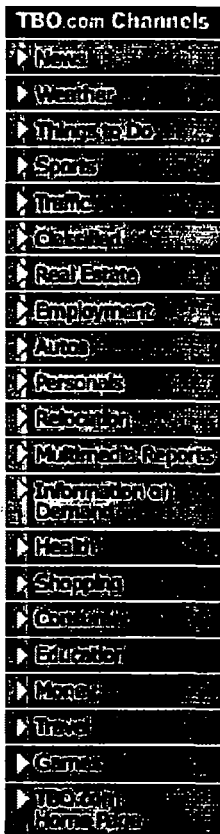


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said. He said it is too early to tell whether lawsuits might be pursued, but said property damages could be handled on a class-action basis, and health concerns could be handled individually.

Mother Frets Over Son

One resident who contacted Masry, Shannon Franco, is concerned about a rare developmental delay experienced by her 2 1/2-year-old son, Nicholas, who has difficulty communicating. He has been in and out of the hospital for tests three times, but doctors have not been able to pin down a diagnosis. Franco, a biologist, says she "knows how things that are in the air and water can affect health."

She moved to the area just east of County Line Road and almost a mile from the plant when pregnant with Nicholas. She didn't realize there was a phosphate processor less than a mile away until recently.

Masry asked Franco to send him copies of The Tampa Tribune's articles about Coronet, and to retrieve some documents from the local regulatory agencies. The levels of toxins on Coronet's property concerned Masry, namely "heavy metals, inorganic salts, alpha radiation and mercury," he said.

The investigation is in its embryonic stages, said Masry, who was portrayed in the movie by Albert Finney. The firm will be represented at a meeting at 7:30 p.m. Aug. 19 at Marshall Middle School. Representatives of state health and environmental agencies and the Hillsborough County Environmental Protection Commission will attend the meeting to answer questions and listen to residents' concerns.

History Of Pollution

Coronet Industries is a 100-year-old phosphate processing plant that has been the subject of a federal public health assessment, the target of a local and federal criminal investigation, and is in violation of air and water permits with local regulatory agencies.

Arsenic, lead, cadmium, chromium, gross alpha radiation and fluoride were among the potentially harmful substances found in levels exceeding state and federal guidelines on Coronet property. The plant also discharges tons of dust and other airborne pollutants each year.

The county's Environmental Protection Commission has given the plant until 2005 to correct air emissions violations. The agreement caps company responsibility at \$50,000 a year, but EPC officials said that could change if the plant's emissions are found to be impacting public health.

Health officials will initially test 35 private wells near Coronet this week, said Merritt Mitchell, a spokeswoman for the Department of Environmental Protection.

"We're curious and waiting to know what they might learn - if anything," said Sheri Peuler, whose home on Gentry Road has a clear view of the plant and its emission stacks.

Peuler said her family, with five children ages 11 to 19, has not experienced any unusual health problems during the 17 years they have lived in their home. But she said she and other families are happy that the state's Department of Environmental Protection and county health officials are conducting the tests.

Three vials of water are being taken from each well to test for metals, fluoride and other contaminants, Mitchell said. Results of the tests should be ready in three to four weeks.

"Right now we are fact-finding, looking for a direct link between the facility and the

concerns that the public has," said Mitchell. "We have no evidence that they are linked, but we want to make sure."

In a couple of weeks, tests will be conducted for any unusual concentrations of radiation in the area, she said.

Health officials also are considering air monitoring, and if necessary, will ask residents for permission to sample body fluids and hair to determine whether residents have been exposed to contamination. The nine- to 12-month study will examine cancer rates in the area and causes.

Sheriff's officials and the federal Environmental Protection Agency are investigating claims by former Coronet employees that top management and owners ordered them to dump toxic waste and deceive government regulators.

In the meantime, Peuler said that after health concerns, she worries media attention may lower the property value of her 2-acre home site. "I love it out here because it's quiet and peaceful," she said.

Reporter Bill Heery contributed to this report. Reporter Deborah Alberto can be reached at (813) 754-3765.

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